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Facilitative Leadership: Involving citizens and communities in local decision-making

A new era of community participation in local democracy requires public services staff to develop skills for collaborative engagement.

Here Claire Bynner, Oliver Escobar and Wendy Faulkner describe a What Works Scotland project to create a training course that would develop and cascade skills in facilitative leadership.

The policy context in Scotland strongly promotes, and increasingly mandates, greater and deeper community participation in local democracy [1]. Yet only 35% of Scottish citizens feel they have any influence over decisions affecting their community. [2]

The traditional reliance on public meetings and community leaders is failing to engage wide sections of the community. Many are sceptical about conventional forms of community participation, while others are seeking different ways to become involved.



Meta-planning notes

Internationally, there has been considerable innovation in multi-platform, inclusive, empowering methods to enable co-production in designing public services and collaborative decision-making. As well as new approaches, this new era of collaborative engagement requires new skills sets. Yet the types of skills required for participation are often overlooked or taken for granted – in particular, the value of good dialogue, focussed deliberation, and strategic thinking about process design.

The principles and skills of facilitating dialogue and deliberation are potentially very powerful. They are not just about facilitation, but entail a different attitude of mind and a way of thinking about collaboration. In other words, these principles and practices get to the root of what it means to communicate, to listen, to be heard and to experience inter-dependence. Good design

and facilitation provides participants with more space to learn and form considered judgements. When this works well it can empower individuals and groups to make changes for themselves and reframe thinking about the everyday challenges they face. These principles and skills are at the root of a healthy functioning democracy and should be at the core of community planning.

In short, strengthening community participation in Scotland entails both democratic innovation and investment in skills of **facilitative leadership** across public and third sector organisations.

Facilitative leadership involves...“dealing with value differences, conflicts and mutual interdependence" and "requires something other than traditional leaders with formal political authority which they exercise over others... Facilitative leadership, instead, emerges from the activity of working with others to achieve results everyone can agree to: it is about serving rather than steering”[3]

Since 2015 What Works Scotland has been working with four community planning partnerships (CPPs) in Scotland developing collaborative action research projects, organising research seminars and events, and building capacity in collaboration and evidence use.

Our evaluations have found the workshops delivered by Oliver Escobar to be extremely helpful to local practitioners in their work with communities and community planning partners.

The idea to develop this course was motivated by the high demand for Oliver's workshops and the interest in extending the use of the concepts and practical methods of **dialogue and deliberation (D+D)**.

What Works Scotland Facilitative Leadership Course

The training course was co-designed and delivered by **Wendy Faulkner**, Oliver Escobar and Claire Bynner. It was designed to integrate theory, evidence and practice.

The aim was to make a sustainable contribution to building capacity in dialogue and deliberation (D+D) approaches to community participation. We sought to do this by training a pool of facilitative leaders who will be equipped to deliver training in D+D approaches at various levels within their community planning partnership.

How does D+D communication contrast with other approaches?

Debate	Dialogue	Deliberation
Seeks to promote opinions + gain majority support	Seeks to build understanding + relationships	Seeks to solve shared problems, make decisions

Participants argue, persuade, compete (advocacy)	Participants listen, exchange, reflect (inquiry)	Participants weigh options, make choices (advocacy + inquiry)
Outcome: win/lose	Outcome: no decision	Outcome: win/win

Facilitating collaboration demands a very mixed skill set, with two crucial strands. First, good facilitators attend to the quality of communication in the ‘micro-dynamics’ of conversations; they seek to nurture the real dialogue needed for everyone to work constructively together. Second, good facilitators attend to the ‘macro-level’ strategic and reflective thinking needed as collaborations develop iteratively through planning to evaluation and onward. This includes the ‘backstage work’ necessary to ensure the participatory processes have impact (e.g. on decisions, institutions, services).

The training was designed to build the participants’ understanding of, and effectiveness in, both strands of the skill set required for facilitating collaboration, by:

- introducing and distinguishing the principles and practice of dialogue and deliberation, so it is clear which could be used for what purposes
- exploring the micro-dynamics of group conversations, signalling different communication patterns and facilitation challenges, and encouraging participants to develop a style of facilitation that works for them.

During the course the participants had opportunities to practice the different facilitation approaches and to experience different techniques and tools that can be used for D+D. The strategic and reflective thinking needed to develop strong collaborative relationships was also highlighted throughout.

Feedback



The feedback from the course was extremely positive.

Three or four individuals from each of our CPP research sites attended the two-day training session on 19th -20th April.

Participants indicated the importance of limiting the group size, setting ground rules, drawing on

evidence, and time with the group and away from work.

One of the participants remarked in the feedback on the passion of the facilitators for D&D and how this had re-fired their motivation.

One participant said:

"it has transformed how I understand engagement"

This training was a timely reminder of the continued relevance and importance of face-to face communication in our digital world.

Our 14 participants are committed to delivering at least one training course themselves to cascade what they've learned. It is hoped that these participants might, in time, be part of a growing network of D+D trainers and facilitative leaders in the sector.

More about facilitative leadership and community engagement

For more information, see these presentations and publications by Oliver Escobar:

- Presentation to the Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations Conference in June 2016 Democratic innovation: Involving citizens and communities in local decision making (PDF)
- [Public dialogue and deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners](#)
- [Towards participatory democracy in Scotland](#)

[See more of What Works Scotland's learnings and resources about community engagement](#)

[1] The policy context in Scotland that promotes / mandates, greater and deeper community participation in local democracy:

- Forthcoming 'local democracy' bill
- New National Standards for Community Engagement (2016)
- Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015
- Participatory Budgeting national programme (2014-2016)
- COSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (2014)
- Parliamentary Local Government Committee (2013, 2014)
- National Planning Framework 3
- Christie Commission on Future Delivery of Public Services 2011
- Audits of Community Planning Partnerships (2011, 2013)
- Review of Community Planning (2012, 2016)
- Community Councils Short Life Working Group (2011)

[2] [Ipsos MORI Public Opinion Survey](#) for 2014 COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

[3] Bussu, S., & Bartels, K. P. R. (2013). Facilitative leadership and the challenge of renewing local democracy

in Italy. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(6), 2256–2273. doi:10.1111/1468–2427.12070. pg 3